

## Widening of El Toro Road is kicked off

\$27-million project 10 years in making.

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THE NEWS

A decade-long desire to remove the bottleneck on a portion of El Toro Road is finally being satisfied.

Survey work to start the road's widening project has begun.

And to kick it all off, 100 people including Lake Forest officials, business owners and residents gathered Tuesday at Saddleback Valley Plaza to break ground on the project.

"Your patience and efforts will truly pay off," Mayor Peter Herzog said. "(El Toro) will truly be a gateway into the community."

The linchpin of the city's \$27 million repair job is the addition of a fourth lane in each direction for a mile between Jutewood Place and the San Diego (I-5) Freeway.

Various turn pockets will be added, too. As will a traffic-signal system that - via embedded sensors - can tell where vehicles are and turn lights green or red so the most motorists possible are on the move.

About 250 trees and 3,000 shrubs will rise from 60,000 square feet of fresh landscaping. Sidewalks built for strolling will be added. The project is expected to finish in September 2005.

Property owners of the three gas stations - Shell, Mobil and Arco - on Rockfield Boulevard and El Toro began demolishing the stations last week as part of an agreement



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**PROJECT START:** Officials broke ground on Tuesday. A Shell station, below, was demolished.

## EL TORO

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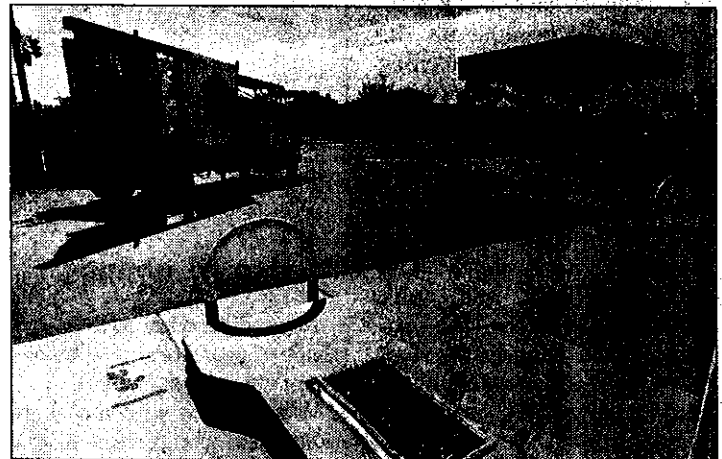
with the city. The land from the gas stations was acquired through eminent domain. Most of it will be used for the road widening and landscaping, project manager Gene Foster said.

Three restaurants - Quiznos, Panda Express and Wendy's - also had to close because the city needed the property they sat on.

The road-widening project is part of a multifaceted vision to redevelop the deteriorating shopping district.

Westrust, a development company, plans to raze sagging, 270,000-square-foot Saddleback Valley Plaza and replace it with a new center. Landowners of the vacant Kmart intend to bulldoze the building, where a Home Depot is planned.

City officials say El Toro



won't close at any time during construction. But some business owners have said they worry about the impact construction might have on them.

"People might stop coming and cut our business by 50 percent," said Satti Cheema, owner of a Subway sandwich shop on El Toro. "(But) helping the traffic congestion will help the businesses grow in our area."

During the ground-breaking ceremony, residents remi-

nised about El Toro and when the Saddleback Valley Plaza were hot spots to gather. Deborah Dormanesh, a 31-year-resident, said the street-widening is the first step in the long-awaited revitalization of the street and its shops.

"We held out a long time," she said. "We're happy."

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